

Barry Zweig Interview

By Ed Benson, JUST JAZZ GUITAR (Feb. 2001)

One of the busiest guitarists in the Los Angeles area for many years, Barry Zweig has performed with Buddy Rich, Peggy Lee, Natalie Cole, and Sammy Davis, Jr. to name a few. He took time out of his busy schedule to meet me at my hotel in Los Angeles during a NAMM show.

ED BENSON: Tell me about your background. Where are you from?

BARRY ZWEIG: I was born in Detroit, MI, but I was raised here in LA. My family moved here in 1950 just before my eighth birthday, so I really am an LA guy.

EB: What made you take up the guitar?

BZ: Just before my fifth birthday my mother asked me what I wanted for my birthday. I must have seen a banjo in a movie like, *Song of the South*, or something like that, so I told her I wanted a banjo. They didn't get me a banjo, but they did get me a round ukulele. It was a Gretsch blue wooden uke and it wasn't bad! My mom helped me with the diagrams in the little ukulele course and it made instant sense to me. I learned to play tunes like; "My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean" and, "The Too Fat Polka." The joy of music was always in our home. My mother sang harmony to songs she heard on the radio. There was such great music being played on the radio in those days. My mother taught me to clap on two and four when I was just a toddler.

EB: Why did you switch from the uke to the guitar?

BZ: When I turned eight, we moved to Los Angeles. Someone came to our door selling steel guitar and violin lessons. I chose the violin, which I played for ten years. When I was fourteen I heard the sound of jazz guitar for the first time on the radio. That was in 1957. It was Dave Pell's recording of "Mountain Greenery", and I said to myself, "I could do that." My best buddy, whose father was the scout-master of my Boy Scout troop, had a guitar underneath his bed that he never touched. He sold it to me for \$10.00.

In high school I was in a great little band called Bill Baldwin and the Seventeens. We did an album at Capitol, Studio A, where Frank Sinatra did all of his hits. The guy who wrote for the band was Matty Matlock, an incredible clarinet player and writer. He was a wonderful musician. His son, Julian "Bud" Matlock, who I hope is smiling down at me from Heaven, became my first teacher. Bud saved me from quitting. I had gone as far as I could by myself and was frustrated and agonized. Everything was such a struggle. Just to play a C scale in eighth notes was such a strain. I loved music and I wanted to play so much and somehow I managed to deal with my limitations (up to a point). Bud really saved me from giving up.

After that, I studied with a fine gentleman named Horace Hatchett. He showed me so much about rhythm guitar and voicings and things like that. He exposed me to all those wonderful Charlie Christian solos. He would point out the melodic force of the solos, the thread, what made Charlie Christian stuff so memorable.

EB: How long were you with him?

BZ: I studied with him for about a year.

EB: Was that the end of your formal training?

BZ: No. I got drafted into the Army in 1964. I was twenty-two. I had a couple of friends in the NORAD band in Colorado Springs. Jimmy Trimble and Randy Allcroft got me into the band. I was very lucky. I met Johnny Smith in Colorado Springs. I studied with him for about a year and it was a revelation. I got so much help from him. I can't thank him enough.

EB: What do you think of the state of guitar education at universities and colleges?

BZ: I think it's great. Frank Potenza, Joe Diorio and Pat Kelly are at USC. Curt Warren has a great jazz guitar program at UTEP, (El Paso). There are great educational opportunities out there. I studied music theory at Los Angeles Valley College and at North Hollywood High School. They taught solfege (do, re, me, etc.) and ear training. You can train your ear. You have to take it step-by-step. You have to have faith in the fact you can learn to hear those intervals.

EB: To me the key has always been in learning tunes.

BZ: That's what I tell everyone that asks me. I tell them to learn tunes and learn how to play them by yourself. I've learned more about the instrument by figuring out how to play songs by myself, even in the simplest way. Just make certain you play the melody accurately, and not some jazz person's interpretation of it. There are a lot of errors in the Real Book. Go to the source. Chuck Sher's books are all legit versions, so that is a great source. Also, if you want to really learn a song, go spend a few bucks and buy the music. Learn the melody and see how it fits with the lyric.

EB: Do you enjoy playing solo guitar? Many players can't do that well.

BZ: Oh Yes, I really do enjoy it, but you know I played for years and years before I did my first solo gig. It wasn't until 1986. I really needed a gig and my friend Dave McKay recommended me to a restaurant owner. The owner was a piano player and an accountant. It was one of those tight times. I had never really auditioned much for gigs, but I did for this one. He told me afterward, "Barry, you played three chords for me and I knew I wanted you." I worked for him a long time. I didn't have that many songs at first, 20 or 30, but I figured out a way on that gig to play new songs all the time. Sometimes there weren't too many customers so I would just use the opportunity to practice new tunes. It was a great learning experience.

EB: How did you get into TV and studio work?

BZ: Three weeks after getting out of the service I got a call to join the Buddy Rich band. I was twenty-four years old, green as grass and scared to death. I walked into the room and there was Oliver Nelson rehearsing his charts for Buddy Rich. The band was awesome! I joined Buddy and stayed with him for six months. At that time I did two albums with him, "Swingin' New Big Band." That was the album with, "West Side Story" on it. I had a solo on that one. It was an unforgettable experience. The last gig I did with him was at a place called. The Chez on Santa Monica Blvd. That's where we did our album. The first album was with Sammy Davis Jr. It was done live at the Sands, and it was burnin'!" I left Buddy in September or October 1966. I was homesick after being in the Army for two years and in Buddy's band for six months. About seven months later, Sammy Davis' conductor asked me to join Sammy. I stayed for fourteen months. That ended in 1968. I wanted to get off the road and live and work in LA.

Little by little I started working in various studio situations. I was a versatile player and I could read. From 1968 to 1976, I did an occasional tour, but basically I worked right in Los Angeles. In 1976, I joined the Dinah Shore

Show at CBS. While on the Dinah Shore Show, we made a trip to New York. All I had was my Ovation steel string and my ES335, which is the workingman's all-purpose guitar. That's all I had. Beverly Sills came in and put this piano music in front of me and it was black! It was a Richard Strauss song with piano accompaniment. She said, I'd like to do this with the guitar. Is that okay? John Rodby, who was the Musical Director, turned to me and said, "Beez, what do you think?" I said, "Give me ten minutes and I'll let you know." It took me ten minutes to the minute to analyze the harmony and the inversions and write a part for myself. I rehearsed it twice with her, then we broke for lunch. I was so nervous. Beverly Sills was as sweet and gracious as she could be. The piece came out pretty well in rehearsals and about 45 minutes into the show, they called me up to the front of the stage and I had to play it live, no over-dubbing, no cutting-in.

EB: If it turned out badly would they do it again in those days.

BZ: No, because the singer is the main feature, not you. You just go and do it, warts and all. It came out very well. Of course, it would have come out well even if she sang it by herself, but it took every bit of musicianship I had to make that work. That was about being a musician, not just a guitar player. It was about being a good accompanist and being a pro. These days I am not involved with studio situations as much. I've gone back to what I have always wanted to do and that is to play straight-ahead jazz guitar.

EB: How does one make a living doing that today?

BZ: I'm doing okay. While working for Dinah, I found a wonderful L5 Gibson built in 1930. I couldn't afford that instrument now, but fortunately I could then. I work quite a bit with a leader/composer named Bill Elliott. We did an album for John Lithgow last October and all I did was play rhythm guitar. Also with Bill, we did the music for the HBO film on the life of Dorothy Dandridge, that came out in August. He has been a great leader for me and he recommends me to other composers on their projects too.

EB: How long were you with Dinah?

BZ: Five years. On the Dinah show I played with everyone from the Mills Brothers to Chuck Berry, to Beverly Sills. Dinah Shore, what a fine lady!

EB: What's happening today, in terms of your career?

BZ: I've kind of gone back to just wanting to play as much good music as possible. I always want to get better at playing jazz. I'm still learning every day. I'm learning new songs and trying to work out chord arrangements and just get better. Today I am busier than ever, playing and teaching. I have been working a lot with Bill Elliott. This takes me across the country from time to time. I recorded two albums with Ray Coniff and did a tour to Brazil last year. I've written a new song, together with Jeanne Pisano (Mrs. John Pisano), called, Table For One. It was recorded by Andrea Baker. She loved the song so much she named her album, "Table For One." Occasionally I do guitar clinics, jazz festivals, club dates, concerts, either as a sideman or as a leader in my own right. John Pisano is producing a guitar-night, Mondays, at Rocco's in Bel Air. Some of the greatest guitar players have played there, including Joe Diorio, Herb Ellis, Mundell Lowe, Ron Anthony and Ron Eschete. I have been honored to play there on occasion.

EB: Do you still practice?

BZ: Oh yes. I've taken some Bach violin partitas and used my own fingerings because, being a pick player, I didn't want to use a classical guitarists fingering. I just choose the ones that are applicable to me for playing with the pick.

EB: Do you teach and is it only on the pro level?

BZ: I love to teach. I prefer a student with some experience, but not necessarily professional.

EB: So you don't mind taking an intermediate player that just enjoys guitar for what it is.

BZ: Not at all. I try to nurture my students with what they can do well and build from there. That's the advice I would give to any guitarist. Don't dwell on what you can't do. You have to balance the frustration of the stuff you can't do with the joy of playing what you can.

EB: What's the future of guitar with what's happening in terms of the electronic music and everything in the studios today? Is there a future?

BZ: I don't think I'm one to really know. I just know what I love and what I do. I'll tell you this, you go to the NAMM Show and look at all the acoustic and jazz guitars that are coming out. Evidently there is a market. They make these instruments because there's some demand for them. I think the future is good. There are some people that are getting the sound and the desire in their head, otherwise these instruments wouldn't be made and people like Bob Benedetto wouldn't have such incredible success.

EB: Is there a future for young guys coming up? Where will they perform? I'm in Atlanta, and there's very little happening. Even in New York there are only a handful of clubs left. For a young guy, if he isn't well-known, to get a break into that club, it's got to be next to impossible compared to years ago.

BZ: You're damn right but there is a future! There are ways to do it. One of the greatest, most dedicated guitar players that I know, Jim Hershman, is living in New York. He went back after having a pretty nice start to his career out here. He plays with the Clayton/Hamilton Band. He went back to the Manhattan School of Music and got his Master's Degree. He is a music lover and a great guitarist. He works all the time. He works on Broadway shows using his musicianship. He also co-wrote a book with Jimmy Wyble of some incredible guitar duets! You gotta have faith. You gotta love it. A lot of guys get day gigs to support their musical habit. Maybe not everyone is going to be a professional jazz guitar player, but it's such a great way to spend your life. I don't regret my decision to become a musician for one minute.

When I told my mother and father that this was what I wanted to do, they never blinked. They were just so proud that I decided to be a musician. My daughter, Malaika, is a painter. She is an artist and an incredibly gifted person. She studied in Paris on an exchange program. I'm so proud of her. I have complete faith in my daughter that she will find a way to use her life experience and her talent to make her way through life. If you have a love for the instrument, a love for music, let it come through. Just play. Don't worry about that other stuff. Find a woman with a job! That's my goal! (laughing)

EB: Have you ever played with Joe Pass?

BZ: I actually took a guitar lesson from him one time. I was working in Las Vegas and he was still with George Shearing. He was exploding as an incredible virtuoso. I went to him for a lesson and after about 45 minutes, he said to me, "I don't know what to tell ya, just play man." You know what? That turned out to be a great guitar lesson. Ultimately everybody becomes his or her own teacher. You've got to draw from everyone you can and from every source. You have to listen to as much music as possible and you have to read everything you can.

This is what makes your magazine so valuable. It's the greatest publication ever for the jazz guitar. I learn something new in every issue. That Roy Patterson wow! Those voicings and those simple things. What a concept! The guy is brilliant. I'd love to meet him. I'd love to sit with him. The arrangement on "Estate" by Gene Bertoni:

Within six measures, I learned eight new chords I'd never even conceived of in my wildest dreams! All those interior open string voices with some pretty tough stretches, but the music of that, even if you just sit and play it very slowly, his heart comes right off the page! To be included in your pages with my efforts, I am truly honored.

I just want to say something about the first piece I did for you a couple of years ago, "The Boy Next Door." I was working for Natalie Cole in Japan and was subbing for her wonderful guitarist, John Chiodini. I did a benefit with her at the Beverly Hilton and they asked me to go on tour with them. I did five weeks, including two incredible weeks in Japan. As a gift to Tabo Oishi, who is the No. 1 Joe Pass fan in the world, I devised the most physically simple, most playable version of, "The Boy Next Door." I dedicate it to him right now, even though my dedication didn't get into the initial publication but hopefully will make it into JJG in the future.(*)

You asked me to do another piece, so I did, Nature Boy. I want to make chord melodies doable and accessible for guys that may be real estate guys or insurance guys. They should be able to sit down and play a song by themselves without it being a knuckle buster. It's fun to sit there and play a song by yourself. On the next piece I'm working on for JJG, the technical level will be higher, but I've been very careful to make sure I got the melody and the harmony right, the fingerings correct. It will be a totally doable song with a great bassline that goes along with the melody. Stay tuned for this one. It was thrilling to read the letter to you in JJG from the French guitarist, thanking you for publishing my arrangement of "Nature Boy." Also, I recently had a telephone message from a man named Wick, who called my arrangement stunningly beautiful. He didn't leave his number and I would like him to contact me again so I can speak with him.